

Defending the Hypothesis of Indifference

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Abstract: *The problem of evil is the philosophical question regarding how to reconcile the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God with the pain and suffering in the world. The Hypothesis of Indifference is Paul Draper’s proposal considering that question. His claim is that the pain and pleasure we experience in our lifetimes has nothing to do with God or some other supernatural force acting as an agent of good or evil. In this paper, I argue that Draper’s Hypothesis of Indifference is a better explanation for why we experience pain and pleasure than theism is and that it survives major contemporary criticisms posed by Peter van Inwagen and William Alston.*

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The Problem of Evil raises several important questions for theodacists—those who attempt to rationalize and argue for the existence of God despite the multifarious needless suffering in the world. Early evidential arguments from evil focused on instances of evil as proof that God is unlikely to exist,¹ and responses to those arguments from the theistic stance focused on analyzing what sort of epistemic access humans can have to the reasons for suffering and evil to begin with.² This has led to debates between philosophers about the epistemic access humans may have to know God’s moral positions.³

In contrast to these traditional positions, Paul Draper’s text, “Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists,” introduces a novel perspective—the Hypothesis of Indifference. Drawing from Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Draper contends that the pain and pleasure we experience in

¹ For further reading with respect to early evidential arguments from evil see Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” 335–41.

² For further research into the origins of Draper’s theory, see Nozick, “Knowledge and Skepticism,” and the refutation of the evidential argument from evil most notably credited to Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance’” 783–793.

³ For further reading see: Howard-Snyder, “Seeing through CORNEA,” 25–49.

our lifetimes has nothing to do with God or some other supernatural force acting as an agent of good nor evil. Furthermore, even if some God-like being did exist, it would be entirely indifferent to our suffering.⁴ His argument is influential because it extends the scope of those earlier evidential arguments from evil.

In this paper, I argue that Draper's case for the superiority of the Hypothesis of Indifference over theism survives existing criticisms from William Alston and Peter van Inwagen. After summarizing these objections, I present two supporting arguments: first, that the Hypothesis of Indifference explains the biological roles of pain and pleasure better than theism, and second, that expecting morally sufficient reasons for suffering in a theistic framework is reasonable. Finally, I address potential counterarguments and incorporate responses from Draper, concluding with some additional considerations on the roles of pain and pleasure and on Draper's position.

Draper argues that his Hypothesis of Indifference better explains the roles of pain and pleasure as biological functions in humans compared to theism. Moreover, he posits that certain aspects of how we experience pain and pleasure provide compelling reasons to reject theism. Pain and pleasure serve various biological purposes. For instance, pleasure serves as a means of encouraging human reproduction, while pain acts as a deterrent to prevent us from damaging our bodies. Humans experience pathological pain or pleasure when their biological system fails to function correctly. Similarly, biologically appropriate pain and pleasure responses occur when they serve some sort of biological function. If pain and pleasure either serve some biological imperative or are the direct result of some dysfunction in pain or pleasure response, then that real-world experience aligns with the Hypothesis of Indifference but would not align with a viewpoint under which pain and pleasure serves some moral goal. This implies that the probability of the Hypothesis of Indifference being true is much higher than the probability of theism.⁵

Draper's text had two major contemporary critics: Peter van Inwagen, and William Alston. For this discussion, I will begin by examining the critiques put forth by Van Inwagen. Van Inwagen claims that if Draper's argument were successful, then the Hypothesis of Indifference would, in fact, be a better explanation for why we experience pain and pleasure than theism is. However, he introduces a critical challenge for Draper's account: every possible world

⁴ Draper, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," 338–39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 335.

that contains sentient life should include patterns of suffering morally equivalent to the patterns of suffering in our own world, or else the rules of that world are massively irregular. As such, we should expect to be able to predict similar patterns of pain and suffering in worlds created by an omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God. Yet, Van Inwagen argues, our epistemic limitations prevent us from knowing whether such patterns would occur in another divinely-created world.

In other words, if these possible worlds do not abide by the morally aligned patterns existent in our world, then there is a substantial failure in its laws of nature. He contends that good in the world relies on thinking moral beings, and this good outweighs the observed patterns of evil and suffering. Van Inwagen then clarifies that, according to his argument, two patterns of suffering are morally equivalent only when there are no clear moral reasons to prefer one over the other. He then suggests that this gives us reasons to doubt, though not necessarily wholesale discount, Draper's hypothesis.⁶

Building on this, van Inwagen claims that our only rational conclusion within our epistemic reach is to suspend our judgements on the Hypothesis of Indifference, the existence of God, and our observations on it entirely. But if only rational response is to suspend judgment though, then there is no way for us to have epistemic access to knowledge of patterns of pain and suffering like those contained in our world or in a God-created one. Van Inwagen suggests that there may exist a true account of the world incorporating both God's existence and our observations of suffering, but we lack certainty. As such, our epistemic position prevents us from accurately anticipating patterns of pain and suffering in theistic or atheistic worlds.⁷

Draper has a response to this challenge with the following line of reasoning: If the theistic narrative posits that humans cannot have epistemic access to knowledge concerning which claim to accept, then the observations of patterns of pain and pleasure under the theistic framework, as opposed to the Hypothesis of Indifference, are based on an individuated outlook of what is considered to be probable.

Draper then uses Bayesian reasoning to counter van Inwagen's argument.⁸ He asserts that theistic narratives do not significantly increase the

⁶ van Inwagen, "The Problem of Evil," 140–2.

⁷ Ibid., 143.

⁸ Bayesian reasoning is a vital component in discussions of how hypotheses are confirmed, namely in the philosophy of science and epistemology. For more information about

probability of the theistic account.⁹ Moreover, even if we disregard our observations of evil in the world and do not factor in the likelihood of the Hypothesis of Indifference, the Hypothesis of Indifference remains more probable than reconciling those observations of evil with any theistic account. For a theistic position to support the thesis that humans are not in the position to compare these antecedent probabilities, that theistic representation of the world would need to be able to judge any range of value to the representation given that theism were indeed true, ultimately good, and undefeated. Since there is no actual, existent theistic portrayal which accomplishes all three, the skepticism about the probability of Draper's hypothesis does not follow, and Van Inwagen's criticisms fail to undermine Draper's overall argument.

As a second point in support of Draper's argument, if we apply the theistic view of good and evil, we are left with a view of pain and pleasure which does not reflect the state of affairs in the world as we know it. Assuming that pain is inherently bad, and pleasure is inherently good, it would be reasonable to expect that we experience pain for some morally sufficient reason. Consequentially, bad actions would lead to God's punishment by suffering, while good actions would directly result in God rewarding us with pleasure. But this is simply not the case, and there are two significant reasons why. Dreadful things happen to good people all the time; and evil people go unpunished. As an extension of that, non-moral agents such as infants or animals suffer needlessly in the world. Beyond that, even though pain teaches us lessons such as "don't touch the hot kettle on the stove," there is no reason that would extend to the argument that "pain teaches us some moral lesson" or, "we need pain in order to be motivated towards moral actions." (In fact, some ethicists might argue that if you are only motivated to do good things to avoid pain or punishment, that these actions may not really be considered 'good' at all). This points back to Draper's first assertion, that pain and pleasure serve biological functions rather than God-given moral functions.

A potential counterclaim comes from Alston. He begins his reply by citing the fact that the typical evidential argument for evil, Draper's argument included, proceeds in the following manner: if the assertion that the traditional understanding of God would have morally sufficient reasons to allow suffering

Bayesian epistemology and confirmation theory, see: Bayes, "An Essay Towards Solving a Problem in the Doctrine of Chances," 337–418.

⁹ For some background on conditional epistemic probability and the burden of proof within the context of the problem of evil, consider: Plantinga, "Warrant and Proper Function."

is unlikely, then God's existence would be similarly improbable. Alston attempts to refute this reasoning by stating that if we are not in an epistemic position to make judgements on the likelihood of God's reasons for suffering, then the atheistic claim that God has no morally sufficient reason for suffering must be implausible. If that claim is in fact unfounded, then the atheistic claim that God's existence itself is improbable must also be unfounded. It then follows that if the atheistic claim regarding God's existence being unlikely is unfounded, then all evidential arguments from evil must fail.¹⁰

Alston's argument takes a different approach. He argues that all epistemic arguments from evil fail due to human limitations in judging the likelihood of an omnipotent and omniscient being's moral reasons for allowing suffering. However, Draper points out that many evidential arguments do not argue for the improbability of God's existence based of God's improbability for having morally sufficient reason for allowing suffering.¹¹

Alston gives no reason for assuming the truth of this claim. So, even if we were genuinely unable to make judgments on the likelihood of God's morally sufficient reasons for suffering, some evidential arguments—particularly those not disputing the possibility of God having such reasons—could theoretically be successful. Consequently, Alston's interpretation of Draper's Hypothesis not only mischaracterizes Draper's claim but also falls short in undermining the potential likelihood of the Hypothesis of Indifference over theism.¹²

In order to keep the scope of this paper narrow, I have attempted to focus on Draper's main argument and his direct respondents. However, there is one consideration that, while I have not included it in a substantive manner within this short paper, seems prudent to mention as further support for Draper's argument. That consideration is the possibility that an all-powerful and all-good God could design our biology in such a way that we do not actually need pain or pleasure to orient our goals in the first place. To counter this, a theist might take up a similar position to that of philosopher John Hick and claim that suffering is an inherent part of the process of soul-making, or character-building.¹³ Hick's claim is essentially that pain and suffering serves the purpose

¹⁰ Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil," 60–1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

¹² Draper, "The Skeptical Theist," 164.

¹³ John Hick's claim regarding pain and suffering is that it serves the purpose of soul-building, and he seems to analogize the relationship between God and mankind to the relationship between a parent and their child. Under his position, we are just as ignorant of God's reasoning

of soul-building, and he analogizes the relationship between God and humankind to the relationship between a parent and child.¹⁴ Under his position, we are just as ignorant of God's reasoning for allowing suffering in the world, as a child is ignorant for their parent's reasons for allowing perceived suffering.¹⁵ Yet this proposition seems objectionable at best.

Even if we were to suspend our disbelief and claim that God purposely designed our biology in such a way that we lack epistemic access to any understanding of his reasons for good and evil, we would have to further posit that our lack of understanding really does serve a divine purpose which leads us to some higher path. In doing this we would still be actively undermining the scale of suffering in the world, and how many people suffer only to die, leaving no possibility for further spiritual growth in life (as in examples of mass genocide); we would need to wholly discount the prevalence of people who go through terrible experiences, and who end up completely spiritually unchanged or even convert to atheism *because of* that terrible experience.

If the aftermath of atrocity and suffering leaves individuals unchanged, or if it results in their immediate demise, precluding any opportunity for spiritual growth or transformation, the potential response to Draper, drawing from Hick, appears inadequate. This shortcoming lies in both the overcomplication of the purpose of suffering and a deliberate neglect of its harsh realities. Draper's argument appears quite modest by comparison. Thus, my personal endorsement of Draper's perspective on this third point stems from its apparent satisfaction of Occam's razor. The simplest explanation is *de facto* more likely. When compared to its opposing theodicies, The Hypothesis of Indifference offers a simpler explanation for why we experience pain or pleasure. With this further consideration in mind, combined with the successful defense of Draper's position from his critics, it seems clear to me that Draper's case for the superiority of the Hypothesis of Indifference over theism succeeds.

for allowing suffering in the world, as a child is ignorant of their parent's reasons for allowing perceived suffering. This can be found in: Hick, "Soul Making and Suffering," 255–261.

¹⁴ Stephen Wykstra makes an adjacent comparison in his theory on conditions of reasonable epistemic access, in Stephen, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering," 783–93.

¹⁵ Hick, "Soul Making and Suffering," 255–61.

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